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METAPSYCHICS IN SPAIN: ACKNOWLEDGING OR QUESTIONING THE MARVELOUS?

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"*Lo maravilloso, lo inexplicable, nos acompaña desde la cuna al sepulcro, hace de nuestra vida un perdurable enigma y humilla constantemente la soberbia de todo hombre reflexivo*'" (Santa Cara, 1924b: 5).

"*The marvelous, the inexplicable, accompanies us from the cradle to the grave, making our lives a perdurable mystery and constantly humiliating the vanity of any reflective man*" (Santa Cara, 1924b: 5).

Abstract

The present paper deals with a kind of parapsychology called metapsychics (*metapsíquica*) as conceived and practiced in Spain between 1923 and 1925. First we focus on the reception of a treatise by Richet that evoked both support (Ferran) and criticism (Mira). Then we examine some experiments on clairvoyance performed at the Marquis of Santa Cara's home, dealing chiefly with the rise and fall of a case of prodigious vision. The analysis gives special attention to the question of how metapsychics was understood and to which discussions it gave rise. The authors argue that the project of metapsychics must be understood within a frame of two tendencies, namely, the increasing popularization and the demarcation of science that were underway in modern society.

Keywords

Parapsychology, clairvoyance, paranormal, Richet, Mira, unconscious

1. INTRODUCTION[i]

The spread of a critical view of science, enhanced by Kuhn's famous contribution (Kuhn, 1962), led in the 1970s also to a renewed interest in the history of psychical research. Turner (1974), Moore (1977), and Cerullo (1982) worked out the

religious, political and social context that made psychical research at a certain time and place desirable and possible (Noakes, 2008). 'Whiggish attitudes' still persist, as the distinction between science and pseudo-science is often used uncritically. But historians like Noakes (2008) are sensitive to the problem, calling for the pragmatic use of an eclectic interpretation in an attempt to understand how and why 'marginal science' came to be cut off from other scientific practices and labelled 'pseudo-scientific'. In this sense, Lagrange & L'Andrea (2002) advise correctly that the supposed difference between science and other cultural activity did not exist *a priori* but was negotiated towards the beginning of the twentieth century.

In this vein, historical research has investigated the social contexts in which the interest in and controversy over psychical phenomena and occultism occurred (Brandon, 1983; Braude, 1989; Edelmann, 1995; Oppenheim, 1985; Taylor, 1999; Treitel, 1999; etc.). Nevertheless, in these works and more recent research (for example Edelmann, 2006; Lachapelle, 2005, 2011; Luckhurst, 2002; Monroe, 2003; Owen, 1990, 2004; Triantafillou & Moreira, 2005; Wolffram, 2006, 2009a, 2009b) some national contexts, like the events in Spain, are not mentioned. Only a few works on the history of magnetism, hypnotism (Dieguez Gómez, 2002; Gonzalez Ordi, Cano, Miguel-Tobal, 1995; Montiel & González de Pablo, 2003), spiritualism (Horta, 2001, 2004; Vilaplana, 2006), and metapsychics (González de Pablo, 2006; Mülberger, 2008; Roca, 1986) are available. We are still far from knowing how these movements pervaded Spanish society. The present paper aims to shed some light on metapsychics as it was practiced and discussed in the mid-nineteen-twenties.

Metapsychics is linked to spiritualism. Spiritualism (Span.: *espiritismo*) refers to a revival in the belief in spirits and the spread of mediumistic activities that took place in Europe and in the United States after the Hydesville episode in 1847 (Brandon, 1983). In the French and Spanish context spiritualism often means Kardecianism, as Kardec's *Livre des esprites* (1957) was considered by many the groundwork for spiritualist doctrine. Spiritualism was not a kind of occultism in the sense of 'occult', hermetic, but was characterised by rational and logical thinking (Kerr & Crow, 1983; Langrange & D'Andrea, 2002) and an interest in public access to empirical demonstration (Lachapelle, 2011).

However, though rarely known today, spiritualism did become widespread in Spain. During the second half of the century numerous local associations were founded, journals established, and meetings held (see Horta, 2001). Proof of the

broad interest in spiritualism can be seen in the fact that the first international congress of spiritualism was held in 1888 in Barcelona (Roca, 1986). Spanish spiritualists wanted to make spiritualism a truly international undertaking. We know from the outcome of the first international congress (*Congreso Internacional Espiritista I*, 1888) that spiritualists' scientific propositions had become clear: they were so thoroughly convinced of the reality of the possibility of empirical proof of the striking events where spirits communicate with the living that they actively sought an alliance with scientists. If we take into account that at that very time the limits of science were also being discussed and negotiated, and consider spiritualism's scientific aspirations, the difficulty involved with making the distinction between the latter and psychical research becomes clear.

While spiritualists sought scientific approval for their doctrine, more or less sceptical scientists became involved in the experimental examination of mediumistic phenomena. In France and other Latin countries during the first decades of the twentieth century Richet's metapsychics led this initiative. After 1880 in Germany, Britain, and the United States the term 'psychical research' was more common, while later, in the twentieth century, Dessoir's term 'parapsychology' came into currency. These expressions refer to different trends but evidence the common tendency to naturalize paranormal phenomena, explaining them basically as psychical processes. The participation of scientists and amateurs in the study of spiritualist phenomena, some of whom became followers of spiritualist doctrine and members of spiritualist associations (for example, Geley), is yet another factor that makes a separation of the history of metapsychics (or psychical research) from spiritualism often difficult to maintain.

The present paper deals with metapsychics as conceived and pursued in Spain between 1923 and 1925. In the second part, following the introduction, we focus on the reception of Richet's treatise, which in Barcelona evoked support from some, like Ferran, and criticism from others, like Mira (part 2). The third part deals with the metaphysics practiced at the Marquis' home in Madrid, centring on the rise and fall of a case of prodigious vision that was interpreted in metapsychical terms. In doing so, our analysis gives special attention to questions of how 'metapsychics' was understood and practiced in the local context, and to which discussions it gave rise.

Metapsychists wanted recognition for a field expected to be scientific but also more tolerant, innovative, and modern. For the most optimistic, it promised a scientific

revolution and new worldview, if it were possible to scientifically prove the occurrence of marvellous events. Thus it raised the question of the boundaries of science. On the one hand, science was becoming more and more popular, but, on the other, that trend was controlled by an increased tendency towards demarcation between science and pseudo-science, pursued at different levels, for example, between spiritualism and metapsychics, and between metapsychics and psychology. But these distinctions, sometimes rather ambiguous and complex, were not adopted by all parties involved.

2. METAPSYCHICS, A NEW SCIENCE?

2.1. RICHET'S *TRAITÉ* REACHED SPAIN

First in Great Britain, and later in France, psychical research had established itself as a field that gained a certain level of popularity and attention, getting the support of some respectable scientists like Alfred Russell Wallace, William Crookes, Oliver Lodge, William James, and others (Brandon, 1983; Cerullo, 1982). Following the First World War an expansion of spiritualist activities could be observed.

Despite growing criticism, by the early 1920s metapsychics was booming in France. In 1919, in addition to the British and American societies for psychical research, the ambitious *Institut Métapsychique International* was founded in Paris (Lachapelle, 2011). Names like Charles Richet, Gustave Geley, Eugene Osty, and René Sudre stand for relevant research projects related to that institution. Beloff (1993) sketched psychical research of the second decade of the twentieth century, pointing out particularly: a) the spectacular nature of the phenomena, both physical and mental; b) their dependence on certain gifted individuals; c) the exploratory or free-wheeling nature of tests devised to study the phenomena; and d) the recurrent difficulty of ever coming to any conclusion even within the psychical research community itself.

Only the positivist conception of science, viewing research as merely a matter of collecting and organizing empirical or experimental facts independent of ideas and theories, made sense of metapsychics and psychical research as a scientific project. Thus psychical researchers and metapsychics insisted on separating the spiritualist belief or theory from the study of spiritualist phenomena and facts (see, for example, Ulrici, 1880; Grasset, 1904, 1907; Richet, 1922, etc.). The epistemic distinction was

crucial because it implied the possibility of a neutral, 'unimpassioned' scientific study of the phenomena.

That was also the aim of French physiologist and Nobel Prize winner Charles Richet (1850-1935) who, since 1905, tried to establish on this ground a new autonomous discipline called metapsychics. In his *Traité de Métapsychique* (1922) he later summed up the empirical evidence he had been able to accumulate; it is considered one of the most important contributions to the field.

The publication was announced in the Spanish press and supported by some scientists like the hygienist Angel Pulido y Fernández (1852-1932), the physiologist August Pi i Sunyer (1879-1965), and the physician Humbert Torres i Barberà (1879-1955). Even spiritualist associations celebrated the talks delivered on metapsychics at that time (Mülberger et *al.*, 2009). A Spanish translation of Richet's book appeared already in 1923. In 1925 Richet's invitation became reality. During his stay in Barcelona he gave two conferences. At the first he talked about physiology (anaphylaxis) at the medical faculty and at the second he promoted metapsychics in a public talk, held at a packed hall at the Ateneo (Pi-Sunyer, 1935). During the same year a second Spanish edition was published to meet the growing demand, a fact celebrated by Richet in the prologue written for that occasion (Richet, 1925: VII).

The publication of the treatise reached Spain at a moment when the country was undergoing important political changes. After the terrible 'Spanish flu', in the midst of a period characterized by great economic difficulties and political crisis, Primo de Rivera's dictatorship began governing the country. His ascension to power in 1923 was tolerated and supported by almost all social groups and followed by a certain degree of optimism and good intent (Shubert, 1990). Until 1925 the new regime experienced an economic boom and made some political progress, like the pacification of Morocco, a much-needed piece of labour legislation, and an ambitious plan for public construction projects. But public opinion soon changed as the hope for the promised convocation of the constituent Assembly (*cortes constituyentes*) vanished. The regime relied increasingly on the country's reactionary forces, the military and the Church, exerting growing repression, directed mainly at Catalanism and intellectual freedom. The dictatorship entered a period of decline, losing the support of the middle classes (Brenan, 1978).

The rise of metapsychics in Spain and the appearance of Richet's treatise coincide with the first, prosperous period in the regime of Primo de Rivera. The book

immediately provoked heavy response: some readers praised Richet's contribution, others rejected it vehemently. We will first consider a positive reaction, namely the prologue to the Spanish translation, and then review the viewpoint of one critic.

2.2. FERRAN'S ENDORSEMENT

The prologue to the first Spanish edition was written by bacteriologist Jaume Ferran i Clúa (1851-1929). He was known as one of the first to produce and apply an effective vaccine against cholera in the 1880s in Valencia (Casas, 1988; Fernández Sanz, 1990). After this successful invention, in 1886 he became the director of the new Public Microbiological Laboratory of Barcelona (Laboratori Microbiològic Municipal de Barcelona). Strong disapproval of how he managed the institute forced him to step down in 1905 (for details see Roca, 1988).

Despite losing his post at the Laboratory and despite a public polemical discussion that disqualified his work, he was able to continue research and still received some recognition of national and international proportion. Foreign acknowledgment is evidenced by the prize awarded him in 1907 by the *Académie de Sciences of Paris*. In the local context, in 1923 he received the 'large cross of beneficence' (*la gran cruz de beneficencia*) at the Tortosa city hall (Anonymous, *La Vanguardia*, 4.2.1923: 17).

Local appreciation is clearly demonstrated in the obituary published by the Barcelona newspaper (see Anonymous, La Vanguardia, 23.11.1929), stating that the dean of the Faculty of Medicine arrived immediately to express condolences from part of his institution and that 'many illustrious medical personalities' assisted at his funeral. Obviously, Ferran still enjoyed some popularity in his late years.

Ferran and Richet had maintained an intense and cordial relationship for decades. In the prologue the Catalan bacteriologist wrote that the methodological study of the facts revealed in Richet's book makes metapsychics a natural science. He reminded the Spanish audience of the French author's acknowledged status as a scientist. Richet, he wrote, 'displays all the excellences that permit us to consider him a great man' (Ferran, 1925: XI). Ferran insisted on presenting metapsychics as serious science, based exclusively on the observation of nature, lacking adherence to any mysticism or religion, not infringing on any orthodoxy.

In line with Lodge, Flammarion and Geley, the elderly Catalan bacteriologist accepted Richt's hypothesis of the existence of a mysterious omnipresent fluid that

demonstrates, on his view, the certain existence of a cosmic, subtle, intelligent power acting through vibratory rhythms. Inspired by this idea and by reading Crookes (1874) he asks: 'Is there anything that would better demonstrate the existence of a genuine cosmic power, which is positively intelligent *per se*, than the beauty of Katie King (…)?' (Ferran, 1925: IX).

Surprisingly, it seems that Ferran had himself witnessed some events that verified telekinesis[ii] and thought transfer: 'Here I could present some detail of experiments done with great success at the same place where I am writing this prologue, experiments where the perceiver, in a cataleptic state, pronounced out loud the reading done silently by another subject under severe surveillance, excluding any possibility of fraud' (Ferran, 1925: XII). In a letter he wrote to his colleague and friend Angel Pulido he declares that he had been following with enthusiasm the studies on metapsychics for 50 years and that it was in his own laboratory that irreproachable proves of thought transference had been delivered (letter of Ferran to Pulido written the 4th of July 1922, document found at the archive: Museu d'Història de la Medicina de Catalunya).

In his view, study in the field was not necessarily limited to metapsychics. Analogue phenomena, whose nature are ignored, but produced by this force can be observed everyday in science, such as magnetic power and Hertz waves.

For Ferran, this omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent force, known from antiquity, becomes apparent especially in biology. Using Geley's notion of 'ideoplastic power', he refers to a power that would lead to a physiognomic reproduction of the child with regard to the mother (or the breast-feeding female) transmitted through milk. The Catalan physician put his vitalist theory as follows: 'In all these cases the living protein transmits faithfully the specific character, partly similar to the seeds and the germs of all living organisms; they unify the past and the future of the species to which they belong, reproducing it easily' (Ferrán, 1925: XIV). With these digressions Ferran was consciously going beyond (and even against) Richet's metapsychics (see Richet's critique of Geley's theory, 1925: 715). But the Catalan scientist wrote 'if I bring these [examples] here it is [because I want] to foster the idea that intelligence adopts infinite modalities' (Ferran, 1925: XV).

Ferran is well known for bacteriological studies and vaccine campaigns but neither as a spiritualist nor as a metapsychist (books on Ferran like Matilla, 1977; Potau, 1977; Roca, 1988 leave this aspect of his biography unmentioned). It is clear

that his life was dedicated to his laboratory studies. But his prologue to the treatise indicates that his daily observing and recording natural bacteria processes was followed by certain metapsychical reflections and interests.

Ferran shared with Crookes, Lodge, Flammarion, and Richet the awareness of gaps and constraints in current scientific explanation. An unknown kind of natural force that connects, and causes, several still poorly understood phenomena was imaginable. As with Flammarion (1917), that force would be a mental and physical hybrid: intelligent but somehow physical, propagating itself via ether vibrations.

When writing the prologue for Richet's treatise, Ferran did not have to worry about his reputation. Concluding a troubled yet successful career, having gone through what some have called the 'Spanish Dreyfus-affair', he was in a position to express his private thoughts. He freely articulated his enthusiasm at reading about Crookes's encounters with ghosts, and surpassed Richet's metapsychic approach with speculation about the mysteries of life and biology.

Ferran did, however, make clear that in his opinion these meditations and metapsychics as such do not in any way transcend the area of genuine, positive (orthodox) science. Other scientists disagreed.

2.3. THE VOICE OF A CRITIC

2.3.1. MIRA VERSUS RICHET

Bensaude-Vincent & Blondel (2002) remark that at the beginning of the twentieth century a 'progressive sacralisation' of science took place, enforcing more and more a distinction between science and pseudo-science. The aspect highlighted by these French historians of science can be clearly demonstrated by examining metapsychical meetings. After controversial participation in international psychological conventions, spiritualists and psychical researchers started to be excluded and began organizing their own meetings. The First International Congress on Psychical Research was held in Copenhagen in 1921, followed by a second (1923) in Warsaw and a third (1927) in Paris, all within ten years (Lachapelle, 2005, 2011).

Beloff's claim that the nineteen-twenties were a period of expansion also fits the Spanish context, where interest in metapsychics clearly grew. An analysis of a newspaper shows that after 1923 the term metapsychics gained a certain popularity in Spain (Mülberger, et al., 2009).

But the rejection by some scientists became more evident, too. One was the young Catalan psychiatrist and psychologist Emili Mira i López (1896-1964), who had begun his career influenced by the 'biological school' of August Pi Sunyer and after 1923 was politically linked to a Catalan socialist group (Mülberger & Jacó, 2008). He collaborated with the Institute of Professional Guidance (*Institut d'Orientació Professional*) at Barcelona, where he became director in 1926. At the time he was about to get his doctorate's degree in Madrid, Mira (1922 and 1923) anonymously published a harsh critique of Richet's treatise in a medical journal.

Following a short summary recognizing an inability to discuss all the cases contained in Richet's book, Mira picked out for discussion sessions involving the spirit Bien-Boa. Mira attacked what he considered to be an uncritical attitude. Surrounded by spiritualists, Richet should have been more careful and suspicious, seriously examining the hypothesis that the general's driver was acting as a 'ghost'. Mira accused the French physiologist of exhibiting a typical 'attitude of the innocent bourgeois', an expression that well-matched the former's socialist background. He goes on to say 'Something incomprehensible, Richet willingly accepts the conditions imposed, maintaining a statuesque inertia when he should have acted decisively' (Mira, 1923: 72-73).

Instead of presenting a large number of séances in an attempt to collect a great quantity of data, Richet should have taken more care to ensure the quality of his empirical basis by presenting only a few cases of materialisation where fraud would have been 'logically' impossible. Mira regrets Richet's repeated emphasis that these materialisations are *a new fact* and do not contradict scientific knowledge. Richet must have written it in a moment of absurd confusion, he says. Mira's critique ends saying '... we believe that with the publication of his Traité de Métapsychique Richet has suffered a painful and dangerous delusion' (Mira, 1923: 77).

The comment reveals the impact that Richet's treatise had had on Catalan society. Spiritualist and metapsychical activities were so widespread that Mira felt it necessary to assist at séances. He mentions his participation in spiritual sessions held in Barcelona. At first he had been perplex at seeing what in his eyes must be illusions, hallucinations, and a general acceptance of absurd ideas. In his spontaneous way he once even acted as a medium himself, in order to test the credulity of the audience. His reports of success at having produced movements of the table, automatic writing and the materialization of a spirit are amusing: 'All this

was totally welcomed and some of the spectators even saw a luminous star on my head, a manifest sign of me being a medium' (Mira, 1923: 75).

In an attempt to pathologize spiritualism, the psychiatrist Mira diagnosed what he called 'spiritualist paranoia', because 'not everyone can tolerate the blind acceptance of these ideas' (Mira, 1923: 75).[iii] Therefore, in his opinion, Richet should have published his thoughts and observations in a scientific journal, for perusal and discussion by experts only. The book with all its figures (photographs) addressed the lay public, thereby creating much confusion.

With his work at the Institute for Professional Guidance Mira represented the professional role of the psychologist. Although a fervent popularizer of psychological science, he was against this new psychological 'business' spreading throughout the city of Barcelona and elsewhere. So-called 'psychological centers' were being set-up by medium promoters, intentionally making it difficult for the public to discern among 'commercial spiritualism' and scientific / academic psychology. Mira was eager to publicly unmask mediums having supposed 'psychical power', in an attempt to show to lay persons what psychology is not.

2.3.2. MIRA'S DISAGREEMENT WITH TORRES

Soon after the appearance of Mira's anonymous harsh critique came a reaction from spiritualist physician Humbert Torres of Lleida. He was well known for his republican and regionalist political activities. Following the steps of his father he became a central promoter of spiritualism and metapsychics in Spain (see *Congreso Internacional Espiritista V*, 1934 and Torres, 1929). In defence of Richet he mentioned two talks delivered just one year before, at the Ateneo. After visiting the *Institut Métapsychique International*, he had tried to prove to the Catalan audience the reality of the physical phenomena produced by Eusapia Palladino.

Of course, he agreed with Mira that the hypothesis of fraud should be the starting point of every serious experimenter. But after having had their own experiences, famous scientists concluded that surprising phenomena like telekinesis, ectoplasm, and more, are genuine and cannot be explained as hallucination or collective illusion. He concluded, adding his own opinion based on thorough empirical observation, that 'Whether or not it contradicts our own convictions is less relevant' (….) 'when subjective and objective metapsychical phenomenology', (...), has been

proven with the same reliability as the force of gravity or the existence of the city of Barcelona' (Torres, 1923: 398).

Mira rebutted. He felt honoured at having provoked a reaction by such a prominent figure as Torres, but he rejected the 'neutral position' invoked by the metapsychists by claiming *'tout est possible*' (Mira, 1924b). Though some eminent authorities may assure us of the existence of strange phenomena, we are not obliged to believe them blindly.

Mira tried to spread scepticism even in cases where the observation was made by famous scientists like Richet. He demanded personal logical reasoning and more convincing empirical demonstration, like his colleague Gonzalo Rodríguez Lafora (1886-1971) (1975: 175), whom we will discuss later.

When participating in séances he seemed to follow the advice issued more than a decade earlier by the Barcelonan physician Jeròni Estrany Lacerna (1857-1918) who had asked for 'implacable acerbity' in mediumistic examination: '…. In these circumstances social awareness and delicacy, useful in everyday life, are of secondary value' (Estrany, 1908: 143). Mira also employed the method of 'unmasking', used in the United States with the help of magicians (see part 3.2.2.).

Through his work on applied psychology and his involvement in international conferences on psycho-techniques, Mira had contact with French psychologists like Henry Pierón. In the spring of 1922, Pierón was devising frustrating 'control experiments' to study the materialization of ectoplasm with the medium Eva C. (Parot, 1993). During his career, the French psychologist had become a leader in the struggle against what he called 'impostors and quacks', who seemed to guide psychology towards metapsychics (Parot, 1993; Plas, 2000). Mira followed his colleague and friend in this endeavour.

Coon (1992) has already outlined the psychologists' opposition to psychical research and spiritualism, interpreting their aversion as a reaction of scientists of a 'feeble' scientific status (see also Marshall & Wendt, 1980). While psychologists were still struggling to be recognized as genuine scientists, they felt extremely uncomfortable about the proximity of the suspicious field of metapsychics that dealt with the paranormal, therefore acting as epistemic police.

Nevertheless, in order to avoid over-simplification, it is important to keep in mind the complexity of the situation. On the one hand, Ferran and Richet never interpreted their interest in materialization or telepathy as something that was

diverting them from orthodox science or violating any boundary of science. The only difference Richet admitted between himself and more sceptical scientists was a more open-minded attitude towards infrequent natural phenomena (Richet, 1923). Mira, on the other hand, who appears here as a 'guardian' of positive science, was, during these years, interested in Janet's work, psychoanalysis and in exploring the sub-conscious (Mira, 1925). Apparently Mira did not dismiss (subjective) metapsychics because he thought that the phenomena were not real, nor did he deny belief in the power of the unconscious. He did not accept Richet's interpretation, but above all, he was troubled by the problem of professional expertise and scientific authority. Thus his protest against metapsychics followed mainly from a fear of the social consequences that the popularization of metapsychics had in the local context.

3. METAPSYCHICS AND CLAIRVOYANCE AT THE MARQUIS' HOME

3.1. SANTA CARA'S ENQUIRY INTO THE MYSTERIOUS SUPRA-NORMAL MIND

In Spain we find scientists like the respected astronomer Josep Comas Solà who had been invited to spiritualist sessions. In his articles (Comas, 1908) he accepted part of the phenomena, seeking natural explanations in the psychological realm (Comas, 1908; Roca, 1986). Later other scientists like physician Humbert Torres would follow Richet's call for a study of metapsychics, as we have just seen in his counter-attack on Mira. Another contributor to the field was the marquis of Santa Cara[iv] (1870-1940). His book entitled 'An Enquiry into the Mystery, Experimental Trials on Somnambulic Lucidity'[v] (Santa Cara, 1924b) gives us an idea of what kind of metapsychics he was practicing.

The book documents many sessions the marquis had been organizing to prove clairvoyance, involving several non-professional mediums under hypnosis. Hypnotism and somnambulism became widespread in Spain towards the end of the nineteenth century (González Ordi, Cano & Miguel-Tobal, 1995) and the first three decades of the twentieth century, when even distance courses became popular (González de Pablo, 2003). The marquis was able to use these techniques and believed that research in this field attains experimental control through a governing of the medium by the experimenter with the help of hypnosis. Santa Cara's book literally transcribes the interrogation he performed on non-professional mediums in trance, assuring the reader that, surprisingly, most of the statements were correct[vi].

How can a perceptive woman know what another person is doing, someone she cannot see and probably does not even know? Like Myers and Janet (Crabtree, 2003), Santa Cara expected hypnosis or somnambular trance to induce mental dissociation, permitting the appearance of lucidity. Lucidity is defined by Santa Cara as a 'polypsychical faculty' in which several levels of human thought intervene (Santa Cara, 1924b: 249). It is a faculty 'which appears in certain subjects receiving perceptions in their brain, without the mediation of the usual senses and unlimited in space and time' (Santa Cara, 1924b: 42).

This category includes several phenomena: perception of persons or objects that cannot be observed (because they are far away), telepathy, precognition and intuition. Following Osty, Santa Cara grouped them under the name 'metagnomia'. The precise aim of his observations, which were very similar to Osty's (1923), was to contribute to an encyclopaedia on metapsychics that would inform about 'metagnomia' as a subcategory of what Richet called 'cryptesthesia'.

In trying to explain the mechanism by which metagnomia operates, Santa Cara refers to a hypothesis concerning a vibration emitted by a certain unknown kind of ether. This ether would take mental vibrations from brain to brain, in a way similar to how two instruments can be connected through electricity (Santa Cara, 1924b: 99). Sensitive persons perceive these vibrations by filling their mind with certain images of foreign thoughts. Following Lodge he even speculates that these vibration waves could occur within a physical-psychical fluid which would be the clue to the long-distance contact between two brains.

Although we all are expected to have this capacity, certain persons would be more capable. They can cancel the conscious part of their personality. In his view a process supposed to give rise to unconscious intuition in the form of instincts is able to activate an unknown cognitive power. While four different functions of the unconscious were discussed at that time by psychologists like Flournoy (Ellenberger, 1970; Shamdasani, 1994; Vidal & Barras, 1996), Santa Cara does not mention these and refers only to an affective and cognitive function. The so-called 'creative function' would be limited. Following Osty, Santa Cara makes clear that the intuitive ideas a sensitive (medium) can capture with his/her conscience are only the ones which can be represented through the mental images of his own imagination.

Throughout the book, Santa Cara declares having been a personal friend and follower of Geley and Osty. His explanations are clearly inspired by Osty's work on

supra-normal knowledge (Osty, 1923), but also by the theories of Grasset, Geley, and Myers. The conclusion concurs with Richet in rejecting the famous empiricist slogan: *nihil est in intellectu, quod non prius fuerit in sensu.* Instead, he believed that our human mind can get true knowledge by ways other than our five senses, a theory that presupposed the existence of a special human psychical capacity. Without being a spiritualist, but politically conservative[vii] and Catholic, Santa Cara's final aim was to use metapsychics to defend a spiritualist (in the sense of idealist) position against materialism: 'The study of mediumnity and all the metapsychical phenomena outline with meridian clarity the supreme human destiny in states subsequent to physical disaggregation, while, at the same time, (...) perceiving the infinity of the Author' (Santa Cara, 1924b: 29).

As a cultivated aristocrat he sought close personal contact with intellectuals and scientific authorities such as the writer Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), Spanish mine engineer Joaquín Menéndez Ormaza and the important physicist Blas Cabrera i Felipe (1878-1945). With his 'experimental study' of clairvoyance he attempted to establish himself as a scientist, an expert in the new field of metapsychics or, more precisely, the sub-field of metagnomia. With this aim, in 1925 he founded a metapsychical society and a journal entitled 'Journal of Metapsychical Studies' (*Revista de Estudios Metapsíquicos*). Meanwhile, however, his son's new visual metapsychic capacity had become known.

3. 2. 'THE SPANIARD WITH THE X-RAY EYES'

3.2.1. ARGAMASILLA: A YOUNG ARISTOCRAT BECOMES A METAPSYCHICAL CELEBRITY

Between 1912 and 1921 a German physician named Rudolf Tischner proved 'psychoscopy' or 'clairvoyant reading' to be a genuine ability which is supposed to enable people to read a message enclosed in a sealed envelope or to ascertain the particulars of a concealed object. The most notable exponent of clairvoyance at that time was a non-professional medium, the Polish engineer called Stefan Ossowietzki, who was tested successfully in Paris and Warsaw between 1921 and 1923 by Geley, Richet and others[viii]. While writing his treatise in 1922, Richet was still impressed by these performances stating: '… the phenomenon of cryptesthesia in these clairvoyants, [and] exceptional beings, cannot be doubted' (Richet, 1925: 225).

At that time a case of prodigious vision in the marquis' eighteen-year-old son, Joaquin (María) Argamasilla de La Cerda y Elio (1905-1985) became a national sensation. Argamasilla's father and promoter called his son's outstanding capacity 'metasomoscopy'[ix]. The strange power enabled him to identify objects and even read, blindfolded, messages closed in a locked metal box. This fact was discovered in November 1922 and afterwards certified in several sessions by an expert committee in the presence of a notary (Santa Cara, 1924b). Repeated sessions under the surveillance of different authorities (scientists, engineers, aristocrats - including the royal family-, intellectuals), and the press confirmed the miraculous performance (Mülberger, *et al.* 2009). The phenomenon was presented in the news as a 'metapsychical case', and in doing so helped direct the attention of the local public and the scientific community towards metapsychics.

In February 1923 a personal friend of the marquis, Joaquín Menéndez Ormaza, reported in a progressive liberal newspaper (*El Imparcial*) on a 'black light' that allows seeing through opaque bodies. The article announced the relevance of the finding: 'We need not call attention to the scope of the consequences; the physical and spiritual revolution that would derive from the constant and firm proof of the visual phenomena' (*El Imparcial*, 16 February, 1923 cited in Menéndez Ormaza, 1923: 32)[x].

After local scientists like the prestigious engineer, mathematician and inventor Leonardo Torres Quevedo (1852-1936) and Blas Cabrera had confirmed the prodigious capacity, the first foreign expert to be immediately consulted was Charles Richet. The fact that the marquis and his son looked for approval in Paris exemplifies the close contact that Spanish metapsychics had with the Institut Métapsychique International.

Once Richet had examined the Spanish medium, fragments of the French scientist's letter appeared cited in the daily press regarding the 'surprising lucidity of Joaquin' (Masriera, 1924a: 12). The French scientist had confirmed the reality of the young aristocrat's capacity and predicted that humanity was about to experience a great scientific discovery with the study of new rays. His prognosis fell on fertile soil in Spain as it gave rise to speculation in this direction.

The topic became interesting enough for the young chemist Miquel Masriera Rubió[xi] (1901-1981) to inform readers of Catalan bourgeois newspaper *La Vanguardia* of the case (Masriera, 1924a). Intrigued, he even travelled to Madrid in

order to assist in a session. After carefully observing the young man's performance, Masriera (1924b) was convinced of the phenomenon's authenticity. Excited by the dramatic dimension of the empirical fact, he looked for scientific explanation. He had in mind the hypothesis of ophthalmologist Manuel Maluquer, adopted also by Menéndez Ormaza (1923), that low frequency rays were emitted by the human brain, able to traverse opaque bodies. Despite the dismissal of Blondlot's N rays, the notion of the existence of unknown rays was still present in the public and in the scientific imagination.

In his search for a confirmation of a scientific explanation of this sort, the Catalan chemist had no luck interviewing the scientists who had assisted in the session. Cabrera did not confirm Maluquer's theory but simply stated that modern physics was unable to explain it. Masriera ended his interview disappointed, asking himself how it could be that science is unable to explain this newly discovered perceptual capacity, supposedly dormant in every human being.

Notwithstanding, hypotheses and theories continued to circulate. Between 1923 and 1926 the case was discussed in newspapers like *El Sol, El Imparcial* and *La Vanguardia*. The marquis as promoter of the case and expert in metapsychics was puzzled by the fact that the boy exhibited metasomoscopy without needing to first enter any somnambular or hypnotic trance. In a letter to the newspaper *ABC*, Santa Cara distinguished his son's especial capacity from clairvoyance and therefore did not include the case in the main part of his book (Santa Cara, 1924a, 1924b). Ménedez Ormaza's theory postulated the discovery of a yet unknown kind of light rays which are perceivable in case of sensitive (organic) hyperesthesia. Thus, the 'marvellous' lied not in the son's capacity, but in the detection of a new kind of light rays in the physical realm.

3.2.2. HOUDINI AND LAFORA POSE A THREAT

Soon problems would arise. In 1924, Joaquin Argamasilla and his father decided to travel to the United States in order to be examined by the Boston Society for Psychical Research. It was a time when the well-known magician Harry Houdini worked for the organization, investigating mediums in an attempt to expose frauds and tricks. Houdini discredited Argamasilla, after calling him 'the Spaniard with X-ray Eyes'. Descriptions of the boxes were published in the North American press and later collected in a booklet titled 'Houdini exposes the methods used by the Boston

medium Margery (...); also a complete exposure of Argamasilla' (Houdini, 1928: 34-37). The American magician noted that the Spanish medium, despite the blindfold, managed to get a peek inside the box through a crack. Houdini presented a test providing two boxes, neither of which could be opened even slightly. He concluded that 'Argamasilla failed by refusal to pass the test in both instances' (Houdini, 1928: 39).

Once back home, the version of this episode told by the marquises was very different. Argamasilla (1925) wrote in the newspaper that after Houdini had witnessed the power of his faculty for the first time, the magician had proposed to him a 'dishonest' association. As the Spanish team refused, the magician wrote in revenge to the press that he had discovered the trick.

Not everyone in Spain believed it. The prestigious neuropathologist, psychiatrist and psychologist Rodríguez Lafora revealed Houdini's unmasking of Argamasilla's trick to the Spanish public (Rodríguez Lafora, 1925 and 1926a). Nevertheless, he was careful with criticism in an attempt to avoid discrediting his scientific colleagues who had supported the marquis' son's miraculous vision. In order to protect the scientists who had endorsed the phenomenon, he made clear that magicians and professional illusionists were much more capable of unmasking fraud than academics or notaries. He also mentioned his own training in psychology and psychiatry as necessary for evaluating a medium's personality. In this case, as a professional in this sphere, he supposed that Argamasilla suffered from strong suggestive influence from his father's work in metapsychics (Rodríguez Lafora, 1926b).

The opinions published in the press reflect the respect that the country had for the marquis' family. Precisely the fact that the marquis' son was at issue made the case more convincing: Why would a young aristocrat unnecessarily risk his reputation and take the trouble to simulate such a capacity? Who dared to contradict a marquis, supported by prestigious scientists?

A professional scientist, more precisely a psychologist, dared to question Richet's and Santa Cara's authority, as we have just seen. Rodríguez Lafora took care that the North American version of the unmasking of Argamasilla's marvellous vision became known in Spain. Nevertheless others, like the well-known writer and politician Luis Araquistáin (1886-1959), did not want to see suppressed what had

been celebrated as a triumph of the 'power of the will' (Araquistain, 1926a and 1926b).

In the long run, neither the marquis' scientific endeavour, nor his promotion of the metasomascopic case of his son was successful. Scientists like Rodriguez Lafora dared to criticize him in an attempt to demarcate Santa Cara's metapsychics from psychological science, the former represented by him in the local academic context of Madrid. Press statements disqualifying Argamasilla's performance as fraud, combined with statements in defense of his metapsychical vision, provoked for some time heated debates at Spanish *tertulias*, inviting the scientific public to think about what is meant by empirical proof and faith in mediums, and their own psychical capacities as intelligent human beings.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that the disjunctive question with which we began, namely, 'Acknowledging or questioning the marvelous?' is too simple. The question implies a neat division or boundary between those that 'acknowledge' and those that 'question' the marvelous. But once different points of view have been examined, we find a rather complex picture where trends of popularization interact with trends of demarcation in the local context.

At the time Richet's treatise reached Spain, Spanish society was experiencing a certain degree of optimism. Primo de Rivera's regime seemed to be a promising way out of the crisis, accompanied by economic growth and military success. After two decades of numerous new scientific discoveries and technological advances being presented to the scientific communities and to the public, intellectuals and scientists shared a not uncritical belief in science; even when, in Spain, their work was increasingly controlled and limited by the government's harsh censorship.

The international trend of the growing popularization of science produced a spread of spectacular events. International exhibitions[xii] and public talks fascinated a marveled public. As historians of science have already pointed out: with the invention of telephones, telegraphy and electricity, 'the magic came out of the laboratories' (Bensaude-Vincent & Blondel, 2002).

If Röntgen suddenly produced rays without knowing it, why couldn't all of a sudden yet unknown kinds of rays also be discovered? When so many 'wonders' and groundbreaking insights like the theory of atomism and relativity had revolutionized

our notions of physical substance and space and time, why couldn't such novel discoveries be possible in the psychic sphere, too? This was especially promising because a 'psychic or psychological revolution' resulting from such a discovery was expected to give a spiritualist/idealist turn to materialistic science. These questions and hopes did make sense to people living in the nineteen-twenties; in this sense nearly everyone was acknowledging and searching for 'the marvelous'.

But should just 'anybody' make new discoveries? The popularization process invited the public at large to switch from the role of spectator to that of the actor. A field like psychical research or metapsychics proved particularly enticing as all one needed was to observe 'marvelous' events that could happen and were claimed to happen nearly everywhere.

In Spanish society, marked by severe social contrasts and a broad working class living under extremely unfavorable conditions, it was not difficult to find women disposed to making a living by exhibiting special capacities as mediums. In the case of the study of spiritual/ psychical phenomena neither expensive scientific apparatus, nor sophisticated training seemed necessary. In the local context Mira found reason for demarcation in the field of scientific authority, against what he perceived as a case of professional intrusion. His protest against metapsychics was mainly due to the social consequences the popularization of metapsychics had in his context.

Scientists wanted the lay public to admire science, but not to get involved in the production of its phenomena or offering explanations. For this reason, demarcation becomes relevant in a process of 'sacralisation' of science where scientific knowledge is raised above other cultural ways of knowing. A step in this direction implied the severing of an alleged objective empirical basis from questionable theoretical explanation, a view spread by some positivist scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The distinction had a perverse effect in the (para-) psychological area, because metapsychics had been precisely a product of such an epistemic distinction. As a scientific project it was established on the assumption that it is possible to treat spiritualist / paranormal phenomena apart from its scientific interpretation. Through scientific popularization, such a distinction helped non-academics to participate in the process of producing and recording observations, because this would imply that no previous conceptual knowledge is necessary. Thus the marquis, for example, although a Spanish intellectual with higher education but not a professional

psychologist, after learning hypnotic techniques wanted to contribute to an empirical collection in the form of an ‘encyclopedia of metapsychics’.

In practice the distinction proved unfeasible. Someone who would soon recognize this was Popper. After reflecting on the ‘demarcation problem’ he would get to the ‘induction problem’, stating: ‘… in fact the belief that we can start with pure observations alone, without anything in the nature of a theory, is absurd’ (Popper, 1993, p. 350). Stated differently, we can assume that it is not possible to observe anything without first having a notion about what to look for.

What did metapsychists then look for, when confronted with strange phenomena? Santa Cara based his theory on Lodge’s, who, at that time, conceptualized an ‘ether of space’: unknown, infinite in magnitude, and of a ‘reality beyond the present conception of man’ (Lodge, 1925: 173, see also Grean, 2007). Lodge developed what Grean (2007) has called ‘ether theology’. Flammarion qualified ether as a physical-psychical hybrid (Flammarion, 1917). Richet, too, mixed physical forces with psychical power: in his treatise he declared as a proven fact that ‘there exist vibrations (forces) in the universe that act on our sensibility and determine certain knowledge about reality which our normal senses are not able to achieve’ (Richet, 1925: XXIX). Ferran and Santa Cara would adopt this interpretation.

In the nineteen twenties for Richet (1923) the distinction between objective and subjective metapsychics had become essential. While writing about cryptesthesia, viewed by him as part of psychology or 'subjective metapsychics', Richet would move the emphasis to the psychological and the unconscious. For physicians like Estrany (1908) and Mira, the appearances of ghosts in ‘objective metapsychics’ could only be fraud. But ‘cryptesthesia’ or subjective metapsychics in the form of telepathy and lucid somnambulism were considered if not yet proved at least possible to be proved in the future (Estrany, 1908). Santa Cara tried to contribute with his work to observation in this field of subjective metapsychics.

Yet the process of making observations brought with it differences in conceptual description and explanation. On Richet's view, this capacity relied on a new kind of ‘supranormal faculty’, capable of interpreting the received unfamiliar cosmic vibrations. Scientists like Myers, Janet, and Grasset had previously developed different theories in a psychological direction believing in a disaggregation of human consciousness and referring to an unknown psychical power emanating from the unconscious. Following Osty, the marquis of Santa Cara adopted this approach.

Lafora and Mira as professional psychologists and psychiatrists were sympathetic to the idea of a powerful sub-consciousness, but accepted explanations more in line with psychoanalytic theories and conceptualizations like Janet's 'psychological automatism'. Divergence of opinion is at least to be expected when natural but unknown forces act together with a powerful but also mysterious unconscious as epistemic objects, in a context where a connection or unification between the psychical and the physical is pursued beyond the spiritualist 'perispirit'.

Notes

[i] We would like to dedicate this article to Ramon Bayés, who encouraged us to pursue this topic. We thank Alfons Zarzoso (director of the *Museu d'Història de la Medicina* de Catalunya) for giving us access to Ferran's letters and Elizabeth Valentine and Cynthia Klohr for linguistic assistance.
[ii] which refers to movements of objects at a distance.
[iii] The strategy of pathologizing the medium and the sitters was very common in the critique of metapsychics and spiritualism. The Jesuit psychologist Palmes also criticized metapsychics (Palmes, 1932), pointing out the danger of one being 'infected' by spiritualism, which implied becoming neurotic (Mülberger, 2008). Interestingly metapsychists like Richet also 'pathologized' their opponents (scientists against metapsychics), diagnosing a 'neophobia' in academic colleagues exhibiting a morbid 'fear of the unfamiliar' (Richet, 1923: 9).
[iv] His full name was Joaquín José Javier Argamasilla de La Cerda y Bayona but we cite him as marquis of Santa Cara to distinguish his publications from those of his son.
[v] The book must have been edited around 1924 but, unfortunately, the exact date of publication is unknown.
[vi] Meanwhile his private experiments were seen by some critics as light entertainment (Anonymous, 1925).There is also a gender issue involved in these experiments which Braude (1989) and Owen (1989) have analyzed in the case of spiritualism.
[vii] He was a Carlist (*carlista*) coming from Navarra, although he also spent part of his time in Madrid.
[viii] When he was tested on behalf of the SPR the objects used were scribbled drawings plus an inscription. The material was prepared in London where it was folded over and placed inside an elaborate nest of envelopes, such that even the most powerful X-ray machine could not have revealed its content. The entire package was sealed and marked with secret markings. When it was presented to Ossowiecki by a third party he ended up producing in a normal state of mind a perfect literal reproduction of the original drawing, convincing sceptical researchers of his clairvoyance and even psychometric capacity. The latter allegedly enabled him to add to the description of the target the description of the person who had produced it and the surroundings of where it had been drawn.
[ix] The example of Santa Cara shows the easiness and quick emergence of new metapsychical concepts. Neither the *Institut Métapsychique International* nor resolutions like the one proposed in 1923 at the Second International Congress

(Lachapelle, 2011) could easily halt this trend the moment selfmade experts entered the wonderland of marvellous phenomena and new discoveries.

[x] Interestingly, Menéndez Ormaza suggested that 'black light' might present a new way of seeing for the blind.

[xi] For more information on his biography as chemist and scientific journalist, see Nieto-Galan, 2011.

[xii] One held in Barcelona in 1929, organized pretentiously by the Regime of Primo de Rivera

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